

Freude Bartlett, interview Doing serious business

by John Hess and Chuck Kleinhans

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The following is an interview with Freude Bartlett, founder and manager of Serious Business Company, a distribution company known for its collection of animation, avant-garde films, feminist films, and films on sexuality. It was one of the best-run distributorships for independent filmmakers' work. Bartlett worked in film distribution for 18 years and owned and operated Serious Business Company for 12 years. Her experience in this area gives weight to her reflections on the political, economic, and technical changes currently undermining the specialized, independent filmmaking industry.

The interview was conducted by John Hess and Chuck Kleinhans on July 6, 1982, a year before Serious Business Company ceased its operations, and it reflects the distributor's ongoing concerns.

Q: What were your original plans with Serious Business Company?

A: Serious Business Company started with two specialty areas. One was women's films, the other avant-garde filmmaking. Throughout the 60s there was a renaissance of avant-garde filmmaking also known as "Underground" film. This film movement, from Warhol to Brakhage, reflected the social tensions of the decade — the search for alternative values and ways of seeing and defining ourselves. These same aims were reflected in the early 70s in films by women which provided new perceptions of women's capabilities and value. Serious Business Company began in 1972. There was, at the time, no major commercial distributor who specialized or even had a collection of avant-garde films or women's films. Canyon Cinema and the NY Filmmakers Coop did exist for the avant-garde. They accept films and distribute them on an egalitarian and cooperative basis. New Day Films, a distribution cooperative for films about women, started in 1972 also.

Initially I began doing sales only. Because of my involvement with the Women's Movement, I saw immediately that a lot of the films were not saleable. However, they could be rented, and I felt it was important to get the work out so I began

doing rentals. The collection grew considerably — from an initial catalog of 40 films to over 250 titles and our range of subject matter broadened to include anthropology and social documentary, films for children, alternative healthcare films and a very large animation collection. We have the best collection of U.S. independent animation anywhere,

In terms of marketing, except for television, which has grown, the markets have either remained the same or diminished. The non-theatrical market includes all forms of community use, public libraries and the school system, from kindergarten through graduate school. For the last few years the educational part of the non-theatrical market has been dwindling owing to continual budget cuts at the local, state and federal level.

We define theatrical as any screening where admission is charged, whether it is in a movie theatre or on a college campus. This situation differs from classroom rental in that a minimum guarantee is charged against a percentage of the gross. We have been reasonably successful at putting together feature-length packages of short films and running them in repertory theatres, art houses and on campus.

Then, there's television! Definitely a burgeoning market. It is an open question to what extent this market will benefit independents. I have many doubts. Up until about three years ago our primary television markets were PBS in this country and overseas sales, mainly to Western Europe. The advent of cable and pay television systems appeared to open everything up. It may just have been a quick opening, however, and may be closing down soon.

Cable loves feature films. They tolerate shorts, which they call "interstitial" programming. It's used as filler — really "fodder." Short 8 or 10 minute films which are used as a short film in a movie theatre are used to fill in between features. We have sold a lot of films to cable for this use — especially films from the animation collection. While initially cable held the promise of innovative programming, the prevailing mentality is becoming indistinguishable from network mentality. The product they want is very wholesome and entertaining. It's light, certainly not socially significant.

Filmmakers can hardly ever make production costs back in cable — which makes it a distributor's market, not a filmmaker's market. If you have one title that you've sold in one cable system, the odds are that you can sell it to every other system. So, volume sales are the key, the way you make money. But for any given filmmaker, the return will not be an awful lot. If distributors have enough titles they can sell enough times, their cut of the entire process will make them some money. But "some money" is still not equal to the cost of production on one film.

I'd like to put our company in the larger context of film distribution. Non-theatrical film distribution generally means the distribution of feature films in 16mm. That kind of distribution constitutes 90% of the market. The remaining 10% of the market is educational films of which the largest sellers are health and safety films — titles like "How to Coil a Fire Hose" and "Mouth to Mouth Resuscitation." Serious Business Company's and related distribution companies' share of this

market is probably 1/10 of 1% of that 10% market. *All* of non-theatrical film distribution is close to the bottom of the barrel in terms of U.S. industry. It is not in the *Fortune* 500 or even the *Fortune* 5,000.

Ironically enough, the first non-theatrical film, in 1896, was a sex exploitation film: VICTORIAN LADY IN HER BOUDOIR. In 1899, the first industrial film was made by the Northwest Transportation Company — a film on the Alaska Gold Rush, which was shown at the Paris Exposition of 1900. It would be naive to use the word "irony" in connection with these facts. To this day, industrials are the most profitable of all non-theatrical films, second only to exploitation material.

All film springs from the short film format. Even Griffith's first films were shown episodically! My love of the short film comes from its vitality, vision and the short form, which allows many more people to make films. For those who want eventually to make features, it is a chance to establish yourself and work out your style. While this diversity of form is a virtue for the filmmaker, when it comes to distribution it is a drawback. It makes distribution difficult and unpredictable.

Q: Who in the community has rented these films?

A: It changes. It depends on the content of the films. During the heyday of the Women's Movement, we couldn't keep women's films on the shelf. They were out all the time. Everyone from rape crisis centers to churches, synagogues, and private consciousness-raising groups, to the YWCA and the Girl Scouts. People do not rent them much anymore. We began with art films by women and documentaries on women artists and writers, histories of the women's movement and issues sensitive to women. Priorities in the movement and women's films have changed. I believe exploration in the movement is deepening regardless of the drop-off in media attention. Nevertheless, these films, though used in Women's Studies on the university level, simply are not rented very much any more by the community. They went out of vogue!

It's important to distribute beyond the obvious market. Say you have an anti-nuke film. Obviously, the anti-nuke community will be interested. It's important to prepare advertising material that can be targeted to groups who *ought* to see the film but may not want to, say, business and industry. An important part of the social change process that distribution can address is by working to have disparate and even uninterested audiences see films that will certainly educate and hopefully move them. Providing speakers, discussion facilitators and discussion guides or printed material to go along with the film is a part of this process.

Q: How much does it cost to distribute a film?

A: Take a 30-minute film for distribution. The laboratory cost to print 30 minutes from a master 16mm internegative is \$135. We'll concentrate on libraries just to make this example manageable without a calculator. Let's say the film is suitable for public library sale. There are about 10,000 public libraries in the country. Of these 10,000 about 3,000 have budgets of \$10,000 and over. So you concentrate on those 3,000.

Let's do a simple mailing. Not elaborate. For design and printing, that's \$500. Add \$300 in bulk mail costs. Add another \$150 for envelopes. Another \$150 for the mailing house that is going to stuff and seal the mailing. Let's say you don't have to buy the mailing list. You already have it on computer. That's another 100 to run the labels. That's \$1,200 so far.

Now we've reached 3,000 libraries. Let's assume out of 3,000 you are going to get 100 requests for previews. At this point you have to make an educated guess. You can't afford to buy 100 preview prints, and yet you can't tell the people who responded they have to wait two years for a preview print. They're interested in seeing and buying right now. So you need 50 prints to send out right away. This costs you \$6,750. You buy these 50 prints because you believe on past experience that the film is going to sell well. You'd be crazy to invest in 50 prints otherwise.

You have now spent \$7,950. You have these 50 prints for preview, but you are also sending them to a few select festivals, so add another \$100 in festival fees. Without any paid advertising and without counting overhead or the labor and paper involved in shipping 50 prints or the interest you are paying to the bank on the money, you have now spent \$8,150.

Now you've got this 30-minute film and let's say you're selling it for \$300. So how many do you have to sell to break even? The sale of 27 prints will gross \$8,000 but that's not break even because you as the distributor have spent \$8,000 but you're returning a royalty to the filmmaker on every print that's been sold. So you have to sell 40 prints to reach break-even.

Every print you sell after that — assuming you don't have to spend any more money on additional promotion to keep the activity alive and that all you have to spend is the lab cost of the prints — then with your 41st print you will start making money. Maybe it's taken a year or 18 months, though. You've spent this \$8,000, and you wait a year until you can make the first 40 sales. So it's expensive and we're talking about doing it cheaply. And what if you don't sell enough? That's the point of all the mathematics. How can you afford to do it? This is why most distributors will not accept a film unless they can count on making a minimum of 100 sales.

Q: Can you make money back through rentals?

A: No one makes money on rentals. At best, it covers expenses and overhead. Of course, a film that rents for \$100, if it rents often enough, will add up to a bit of money. However, a film that rents for \$25 — the cost of shipping, labor and paperwork is generally covered by our share of the rental. There is no surplus. So rentals are in a business sense a courtesy for your customers and your filmmakers. It is vital because if you cannot afford to buy the film, rental (or television) is the way to have it seen.

We've had situations where we've noticed that an instructor will rent one film title like clockwork every semester for years on end.

We'll call up and say: "You've paid for the cost of buying this print twice over; why

don't you just buy it?" And the answer is, they don't have a purchase budget, only a rental budget!

Q: How do you acquire films? What do you look for?

A: Originally, all that mattered to me was that it meet a certain standard of aesthetic and/or political excellence. This standard, while not arbitrary, was a personal one, conforming to my own values and criteria. The longer I stayed in business, the more I had to look at "marketability." Can this film be sold? There is an edge of cynicism here in that I don't know whether to call this process maturation or a corruption of ideals! In any case, as the cost of distribution inflated, we became more discriminating about the product. There has to be at least one major market the film can be sold to. Despite this dose of reality, I still seem to be hopelessly addicted to the problematic.

We have a film called WHAT CAN A GUY DO? It's is a birth control film directed toward teenage males. And it's specifically about their responsibility for birth control. We did, finally, after a year and a half, sell about 40 prints and reached break-even on it. Most of these prints were sold to Planned Parenthood Associations.

Public libraries were a bit freaked out by the film. In terms of marketing it came out at the worst possible moment. The Moral Majority had just begun pressuring Congress about "sex education" in the schools. A film called ABOUT SEX was shown to Congress and they flipped out and said, "My God, this is what our public schools and libraries are spending money on?!" This meant, however, that socially and politically, it was the best possible moment. Emotionally, we just had to get the film out there. In a way, that's the heart of acquisitions. You look for films that are needed and that cover subjects that haven't been explored yet.

Q: Are you in competition with other specialty distributors? For instance, in the educational library market. Say there are three films that come out around the same time and appear at festivals at the same time and critics are reviewing them in a string. Don't other distributors run into sales in the same area?

A: It happens all the time. AM I NORMAL? is a good example to contrast with WHAT CAN A GUY DO? Even though WHAT CAN A GUY DO? was marketable in the sex education field, it was seen as problematic by potential buyers because there was not a heavy emphasis on abstinence as a method of birth control. It concentrated instead on birth control techniques and the idea that males are equally responsible for birth control. We would call buyers up after they had previewed the film and ask how they liked it. They would say, "But it never mentioned not doing it as a birth control method!" Gee whiz, folks, we've had 2,000 years of people saying, don't do it! Time for a change!

The other objection we received was class and race related. The film features many minority groups: black, Chinese, Spanish. In the Midwest, they would object on the grounds that the film was slanted toward "urban" communities. The age range in the film is 12 to 16. Many communities were shocked! "These children are just too

young!" The most telling objection of all though was that the film was a "values" film, not how-to-do it. One man said to us, "If only you could have demonstrated the use of a rubber by putting it over a broomstick!" America is a technologically-oriented society; pragmatic and how-to-do-it concerns are uppermost, not values and attitudes.

You know, people have complained about our catalog. That our catalog hurts us. You know how a book will often automatically fall open to a page — well, our catalog used to automatically open to a photograph which showed three nude women dancing around together and, seeing this, public librarians were afraid not only of that film but were afraid to get the other films as well!

Back to your question. Yes, we are competing on several different levels: competing on an acquisitions level, competing for airtime, competing for money in the marketplace. Especially these days as money has gotten tighter, the market has become more competitive. Still, I think there is room for all of us.

Q: But don't you come in the door with a certain reputation? And if you come in the door with a catalogue with naked women dancing in the woods, doesn't that color the way that potential users look at everything else?

A: It definitely does. And that is the edge of the conflict I've experienced being in business. If you own a business in this country, it's a vote for capitalism. No way around it. It doesn't matter what you think or believe, what you are practicing is capitalism.

The women's movement formulated and put into practice new ways of doing business that would ease the contradiction. Nevertheless you live on the edge of a contradiction all the time and it takes its toll. Do you distribute a film about women loving one another and dancing naked in the woods because you think it is a lyrical film and it is important to make it available — and scare off customers? Or do you not distribute it and instead offer films that won't scare customers?

We are in business to distribute what we believe in but we must survive also. This system will allow for a lot actually, but ultimately for not enough. Survival often means you have to trim off the radical edges or pictures or films or whatever... thoughts, feelings. It goes deep. Money and greed are well known corruptors but survival also is an imperative. It's interesting about money. You can die of malnutrition making it. It's the vision, not the money, that nourishes, but the body demands food.

What we have to offer in our catalog is, to some extent, colored as much by money as by ideology. There were films we would have liked to distribute which would have made money for us, and the filmmakers went to Phoenix or Pyramid because they were offered advances. We've never had money available to offer advances. We can certainly merchandise as effectively and aggressively (and in some cases more so) than larger distributors. We've gotten around the catalog by doing targeted mailings. Instead of, say, sending 15,000 catalogues to 15,000 anthropologists, we do a separate brochure on our anthropology films and send it

to them.

Q: Is target mailing a trend in distribution?

A: Not a trend. A marketing strategy. Economically, it makes sense. It's been around for a long time. Distribution is basically a mail-order business. And mail-order is actually sophisticated. My favorite mail order stroke of genius is the guy at *Time* magazine. They do periodic mailings to get you to subscribe, and no matter how clever the designer or how vast a mailing, they couldn't get the return past a certain percentage — 2% response in direct mail is considered high.

This guy decided that what was holding up the show was that there were people who really wanted to subscribe but might not have a pencil handy to fill out the form. *Time* included like 5 million pencils and their returns jumped above the 2% mark. People sat there and filled out the card on the spot and mailed it off! So, that's one level of sophistication.

Another level is to be very focused, very targeted in the mailing. You can say: OK, we'll send this brochure on anthropology films to 15,000 anthropologists, say, everyone in the American Anthropological Association. But that's a very large universe. What you can do is gather more specific information on the members — what their specialty areas are, how large their budget is, etc. — a kind of demographic study — so that you're mailing just to those people who have a high possibility of responding. Maybe out of that universe of 15,000, you've got a hot list of 300 names. You forget about the other 13,700 people. You just keep mailing to that 300, because you make 80% of your money from that 300, and let the other 20% go because it would cost you too much money to mail to them. And the longer you're in business, the more refined you can get your list.

Q: What are the institutional purchasers like? In other words, what are the criteria of your contacts?

A: Their concern is use — both at the public library and university level. How will it be used and by how many people.

Q: How do they figure that? What makes them believe a certain group is going to be using a certain film?

A: Contact with their community of users. If lots of people come into the library and say, "Gee, do you have a birth control film?" they will figure, maybe we ought to get a birth control film. Librarians often have to introduce the subject to their area. They have to let it be known that something exists and is available — they often have to be adventurous and introduce the idea, let's say, of male responsibility for birth control — and wait for their clients to come ask them for it.

Public libraries also do their own in-house studies. They keep a list of how many times a film is checked out. They tend to buy films by category — cartoons, travel, health, safety, whatever. At the library level, previewing is all-important. Generally committees meet to preview films and a collective decision is made. The fact that

they may want to buy a film is not always the whole story. Some libraries keep lists of films they want to buy but don't have the money yet. As the money comes in, they buy. In a situation like that, films are assigned priorities for purchase. In a few public libraries, it is a single individual who makes the decision.

Q: Do they all always use the same categories?

A: Standard — by subject. Feature films, health, safety, travel, how to do it. And who knows what happened with women's issues? It became a category, and initially it was a big thing and libraries had to have their film on women's issues. They would buy at least one, sometimes two. The large systems would buy as many as half a dozen. But then what happened is that if you come up with a new women's film, it becomes a harder sell because they feel they have already taken care of that category. At the university level, A-v Centers like several departments to be able to use the film.

We talk constantly to buyers. Every preview we send out, Sally Jo calls them up to see how they liked it — whether they want to buy it or not. It's true in this business as in any other, people buy from people they know, the ones with whom contact has been made. I think what you are really asking though is "what sells?" In a nutshell, I'd say information and entertainment, especially if it's entertaining how-to-do-it information.

Q: I'd like to back up for a minute. You talk about merchandising. Yet you say that initially part of your motivation was related to production, to the people that produce a certain kind of film. I think in many ways New Day was the same. A number of people had made films and realized that maybe they could pool what they had made and do cooperative distribution. Has that had an influence? How does production relate to distribution?

A: Distribution is the flip side of production. They are naturally related. People make films on a certain subject because there is a need and an audience for it. Of course, sometimes people are ahead of the need. Let's look at women's films. The larger companies weren't involved personally with the women's movement. If they noticed at all, they didn't understand the breadth of it, and they wouldn't think to distribute films about it.

But if you were involved in the women's movement, then you could see right away that there was an audience. The basic impulse wasn't as crass as the word *merchandising* implies. It had to do with the strength of the feeling that people needed to see this work — women needed it to be in touch with one another. People outside the movement needed to see it because it offered a new vision and the possibility of creating an enlightened public. To get this material out into the world, you need a system — distribution is that system.

Q: It sounds like your idea or motivation was to distribute films that were necessary, that people needed to see. But now, after having been in that business in this manner for 15 years, that motivation is no longer sufficient. It seems to have been replaced by just getting along. It has now become your source of income. It's

your job. You look at it now from a different standpoint.

A: That's true. Also more complicated than that. I think workers in specialty distribution deserve to be paid a decent wage. After all, isn't that part of what the movement was about?

Q: Is that apparent in starting a business? Is that part of what has happened politically over the last ten years?

A: Now, you remember the late 60s. Everyone remembers the late 60s. The whole economic situation was very different then: it was an affluent time. So that you could actually afford to go into business knowing zero about business and with ideas for which there may or may not have been a market. I feel good about the stuff I did in the very beginning. I used to write articles for library magazines on avant-garde film — what it all meant and how marvelous it was. And I felt that I actually helped create a market for that kind of work. But I was also in the right time at the right place with the right films. So that whatever intelligence I applied in getting that done, I couldn't do it right now for avant-garde films. It's not the right time.

First of all, my rent was only \$75 a month in those days. And the thing about women's films is that there was no separation between my work and my life at that time. It was all of one piece. The social atmosphere was very different. The economic times are changed, the movement has changed — just about everything has changed. The shift in my attitude is not at all that dramatic. I still believe in the value of work that questions what is going on and the value of distributing that work. What I've lost is the notion that the world rises and falls by film. Well, it never did, so good riddance to that notion. Something else happened. Reality changes and so does your experience. The last decade has seen varying degrees of recession, inflation and a shrinking economy.

I began in this business at a time when I was heavily involved in the women's movement both in terms of ideological commitment and community work. It was a high energy period personally, which was reinforced by the support and energy of the movement. I had left my husband, I had a young child, and I had just started this business. The growth of my business and the emotional, financial, and above all the time pressures of being a single parent sapped my energy for community work at the same time that community began to splinter into various factions. The idea of working together to effect change (and there is no other way) became attitudinal rather than actual for me.

I saw my distribution as part of the struggle. But the force of circumstances as well as a personal reluctance to compromise made it a lonesome one. Distribution by nature is an isolating business — mail order and telephone. Periodically you travel to a conference but primarily it's by mail and phone. Being a single parent is isolating also.

You know, these are hard times. Budget cuts in social welfare programs, widespread unemployment, the Women's Movement still at work but splintered,

budget cuts at the federal, state and county level for education, widespread industry deregulation. Amazing times really. The economy was always bad for poor people, now it's being wrecked for the ruling class as well. Reagan is clearly not a man who believes that the safety of the people is the supreme law.

Before this turns into a total saga of disappointment, I want to point out that I view my involvement in distribution as a success story. I began with no capital, no business management experience, and no mobility. I choose a name that many people have told me is ridiculous, in terms of product identification. We have marginal films. Among those films, a handful have the prospect of selling, maybe 6 of them and 204 acts of love constitute the rest. I've been willing to work for nothing for over a decade. There is no rational reason for me to have been in business.

And yet, and yet, on every level except financially, I feel success. Conventional wisdom and the soap operas have it that life is a series of trade offs. Distribution is an act of commerce. To stay in business you must prosper. Best sellers are the gravy. We've lived on the meat and potatoes, no gravy. We have endured without trading off. That is a kind of prosperity.

You are talking to me at a moment of great change. Hard times, financially. I am 40 years old. My daughter has her own apartment. My son will be leaving in a few years. I am questioning and reappraising everything. Distribution has given me a kind of confidence and knowledge about myself — an ability to function in the world that I never knew I had years ago. I've received a lot of support and affirmation for the work I'm doing. I like my relationships with our filmmakers. I like our relationships with our customers. I've learned about working with people. Sally Jo Fifer, who is in charge of marketing and sales, and Diana Muirhead, who is in charge of television licensing and promotion, are wonderful people to work with. Some days, being in the office with them is the best thing about work.

Q: What concerns do you have about the film business?

A: The thing that film has failed to do, and I don't know if it's inherent in the medium, is to move like wildfire throughout the culture. There are books that do it like *The Second Sex* or *The Feminine Mystique* or even *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. Film doesn't seem to do that. Though perhaps there are Hollywood movies that have done that. Certain narrative films that capture something — like *THE GODFATHER* or *E.T.* — and everyone sees them.

Q: *CHINA SYNDROME* is probably another one. It fell into a moment of history and spoke to everyone. What you are saying is there are certain books that have incredible influence on the culture, everyone reads them or talks about the issue involved. *CHINA SYNDROME* was a way for people to talk about Three Mile Island.

A: Books can somehow capture an issue in a way that film can't. What about *NOT A LOVE STORY*? Leaving aside for the moment the question of whether pornography is the issue the women's movement should be addressing at this time, is film the

appropriate medium to talk about pornography? Whether it is or isn't, if NOT A LOVE STORY exists, surely an intelligent film ought to be made that is more comprehensive than NOT A LOVE STORY's argument. But finally I'm not convinced the issue is cinematic. Can you do anything in film that isn't simple-minded on either side of the pornography argument? I don't think so.

We distribute a film by Kay Armatage called STRIPTEASE, which is a documentary about strippers in Toronto organizing for a decent wage. It also shows them at work. I like the film tremendously. It is actually cinematic — a compelling documentary. We have had practically no success whatsoever distributing it. The women's community has rejected it because it deals directly with the sexuality of these women who sometimes say and often appear to be enjoying their work. Politically incorrect! You must not enjoy using your sexuality in the service of men! These are women though who are telling the truth about how they feel. I think we ought to listen before rushing to judgment. On the other hand, we tried to sell the film to the *Playboy* cable channel. It does, after all, show women stripping. *Playboy* rejected it because it was too political. And they were right!

I made the decision to run this business like a business — since then, it's become less interesting to me. If you're doing it for business reasons, distribute hamburgers before you distribute independent films. Because once you start to run it as a business, it narrows the kinds of films you are going to take. It is impossible for me to distribute hamburgers. So I have to figure out what else it is I might do.

Q: I know what you're saying. It's often the case with a small business that the vision of the person who starts it is what really makes it go. I feel that way about JUMP CUT. When we talk about JUMP CUT, it is clear that the three editors have had a clear idea of what we wanted to do. And we worked hard to accomplish it. In that sense, it's not duplicable. Someone else couldn't come along and do it. At the same time, at another point, it's quite clear, to the extent that JUMP CUT is good, it's because of that vision. The vision also places limits on the magazine as an economic enterprise. Our vision was not to make a big pile of money out of it. If we'd started the magazine in order to make a lot of money, then we would have started something totally different. So when you discuss distribution, it seems to me that a whole lot of your story is beyond business — it's the story of what you have learned in the process and how you've changed.

A: You're right. My life and my work have always been inseparable. If Serious Business Company came into existence because of a vision I had, it may go out of business because of my unwillingness to give up that vision. I value the vision more than I do business. Having submitted to so many of the great exigencies of life, I want to draw the line at this one.

I would be better off distributing rug shampoo. Business is just business. I'm capable of it, and also, because I'm capable of doing it, I don't have to do it. Feeling good about the work you do may be one of the great overlooked exigencies of life. I guess I've always thought of myself as a communicator. I made films and distribution as another way of communicating things that other people have to say.

Q: How do you see distribution in the future? With cable and the new technologies, what's going on? Or is it too fluid to figure out?

A: It's really volatile. There will always be a need for specialty products, and people will always be willing to pay a premium for them. So there will, in effect, always be a market for this stuff. But the proportion, the ratio, isn't going to change much. For a long time, filmmakers were saying: "Oh, wait until there are discs, then we'll all clean up." Well, that's ridiculous. Because they're not going to — it will still be a specialty market. But cable has a 110-channel capacity and will open up. However, if you talked to television people on a daily basis, you'd see that they've got MBAs, but they don't know anything about film. They're cynical and contemptuous of their audience. Television is one notch above bottom in the great chain of being — above rocks and pebbles and just below the French.

There'll be channels to view independent work on, but there's not going to be very much money. Some other kind of changes have to happen first, before independents are going to make money. People have to be interested in their work.

There has been a noticeable shift to feature filmmaking among independents. I think it's a good trend to want to speak more directly to the public — especially when the work includes attempts at diversifying aesthetically and politically from mainstream product.

We are always looking for new films to distribute. It's gotten tight because there is less money around for production, so there are fewer films to distribute. In essence, you acquire films from filmmakers, and you turn around and sell them — to libraries, to universities, to cable, wherever you can. Then you look around to acquire some more.

Q: Why do so many distributors move in the direction of production?

A: Distributors know what the marketplace wants. People call you up and ask, "Do you have a film on this subject or that?" And you don't have it, and you know that no one else does. So, if you had a film on that subject, you could sell it.

Q: You said a while ago that something would have to change for independents to make any money. Do you have any idea what that is?

A: Filmmakers need more money in the first place to make their films. Then, assuming they have an accessible product, they need expertise in merchandising. Let's assume for the moment that making money is synonymous with having an audience. Something that finally got to me in the area of avant-garde work. Filmmakers would bitch and moan because no one wanted to see their films. When structuralism was in full flower, it raised the question for me of how much responsibility filmmakers had toward their audience. Instead of complaining about what society owed them, shouldn't they have to make something intelligible? Pound once defined the avant-garde as being always 50 years ahead of its time. I haven't seen a film in the last few years that was more than 5 minutes ahead of its time.

Lots of things have to happen across the board. Poor artists, especially women, need good childcare, a guaranteed annual wage and socialized medicine for openers.

Q: So, should we be making films on the basis of emotion rather than business judgments?

A: I hope you are teasing me, John. Freud made a similar observation about women — that they were influenced in their judgment by feelings of affection or hostility, as if that were a character or developmental defect. I don't think it is a defect in the business world though we face a continual struggle to balance it against other pragmatic concerns. This whole culture has to be different — including placing considerable value on feelings of affection and hostility.

We need a transformation of this society. A general shakeup of conscience. If we're condemned to death on a universal scale, then television is just the retail outlet. We're up against something that's too vast for me. It would be nice to sit here and garden for a while, watching the old roses grow.

For the moment, the answer has to be in the work itself and in connection with other people. I found the JOHN HEARTFIELD: PHOTO MONTEUR inspirational. I liked seeing someone who kept the faith his whole life, who was a fine artist, who wanted a more just and merciful world, and who did fine work.

For a long time the government has been supporting the educational market. The users are supported by the government. The producers are supported by the government. And while everybody was watching television, the government pulled the plug.

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